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# Young People's Attitudes Toward and Discussion of Safe Sex and Condom Use

By Dr Mark McCormack

*Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Durham University*

*Co-Director, Centre for Sex, Gender and Sexualities*



## **Introduction**

As part of a continued revolution in practices of gender and sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people's attitudes toward sexual practice are changing rapidly. Whereas the rationale for intercourse has traditionally been connected with reproduction within the context of marriage, there has been a shift toward the pleasurable aspects of sex across the Western world (Twenge et al. 2015). Non-marital sex is socially accepted and sex is increasingly seen as a form of leisure that can occur between partners, friends or strangers dependent on the social context (Attwood and Smith 2013).

Technology has played a pivotal role in facilitating diverse forms of sexual interaction and connecting people of diverse sexual tastes (Anderson 2012; McCormack 2015). However, formal sex education remains distinctly limited (Moore 2012), and concerns continue around young people's knowledge of safe sexual practices, particularly in a context of increasing chance of drug-resistant sexually transmitted infections (STIs). More research is needed to understand young people's perceptions of safe sex, and the issues related to this in an internet age (Brown 2015). To this end, this qualitative research used interviews with 30 people aged 16-25 about their experiences of sex education, how they communicate online and how they discuss safe sex in a range of contexts.

This research found that there is a disconnection between the general fluidity and ease in which young people engage in sexual activity and the difficulty they have in discussing issues around safe sex. Formal sex education has failed most of the participants, and many have gained their sexual knowledge by "learning on the job": through their own sexual activity, their consumption of porn and searching the internet. While participants generally felt able to discuss safe sex within their romantic relationships, there was more debate about how to discuss it with potential 'hook ups' and less familiar partners. This was seen as a concern, and many worried about not using condoms when drunk.

This disconnection in participants' personal discussions was mirrored in the way they communicated about these issues online. While most participants spoke freely about their sexual activity and desires, often in 'group chats' on various social networking apps, there was less open discussion about their concerns about sex and healthy sexual practice. Slang terms and "emojis" were frequently used to refer to sex, both for humour and out of embarrassment, and most participants highlighted difficulties in discussing safe sex more generally. Asked about the value of a condom emoji, more than three quarters of participants welcomed the idea: to put on their profiles hook up apps; to remind partners about condoms; and, most importantly, to make the discussion of safe sex easier and more fun.

## **Methodology**

In-depth interviews were undertaken in September 2015 with 30 people aged 16-25 across England, with a spread across the age range. 22 participants identified as heterosexual, and 8 participants identified as gay or lesbian. Several participants recognized some level of

fluidity in their desires. There were a diverse range of participants in terms of class and educational background, and an equal number of men and women were interviewed.

Interviews were semi-structured and focussed on a number of issues around sexual talk, sex education, internet and technology use, and use of emojis in discussing sex. Participants were asked their thoughts on the value of a condom emoji and how it could be used. The interview schedule was designed to develop an open and inclusive discussion of sex and sexual health, and follow-up questions were asked to fully explore the meanings and experiences of these issues in participants' lives.

Interviews were undertaken by a team of researchers affiliated with the *Centre for Sex, Gender and Sexualities* at Durham University, and led by Dr Mark McCormack. Interviews averaged approximately 55 minutes, and were transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach that identified themes that emerged across transcripts. Emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes and broader themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). This research does not seek to find generalizable statistics or make definitive claims about young people's discussion of safe sex and sexual health, but rather develop an understanding of how young people navigate these issues that is rooted in the narratives and experiences of peoples' lives, drawing on the richness of qualitative interview data to do so.

Ethical approval was gained from Durham University, and this included ensuring that participants gave informed consent. A key components of the ethical process is that confidentiality is maintained, and this includes ensuring all data is kept anonymous. Participants were also able to opt out of the research at any time, and given the opportunity to review and amend the transcript of their interview. Funding for this research was provided by Durex™. Dr McCormack maintained academic independence in all aspects of the research process and writing of the report and executive summary.

## The Failure of Sex Education

A central narrative across interviews was the general failure of formal sex education lessons within educational settings. Just two of the thirty participants reported having a good experience which they felt prepared them for sex in the future. The great majority (25 out of 30) said that **formal sex education was basic** and taught them little beyond what one participant described as "the old faithful, the condom on a banana". These participants were critical of a sex education that some deemed "embarrassing" and inadequate.

Gay and lesbian participants also highlighted the heterosexual focus of sex education—its heteronormative focus. These 8 participants reported a near-total silence around issues for sexual minorities, with a **presumption of heterosexual sex** in the curriculum. As a result of this, one participant, aged 18 and openly gay, said:

*The teachers gave us the real basics. It was never to do with sexuality, or anything like that. It was just man-woman sex. I learnt more about sex from Channel 4's embarrassing bodies than I did from my school teachers.*

These views were similar to those who were still at school. One participant, aged 17, reported receiving a significant amount of sex education, yet he still did not rate it highly:

*There's lots of it. In lessons, like citizenship, biology though that's about it currently. But I've had it since primary school I would say. About female and male orgasms, contraception, staying safe. I think it's valuable for some people, but it's **a bit of a waste of time...***

The broader concern for many was that sex education was not comparable to the discussion of sex that occurred within student friendship groups. As one female participant, aged 17, said, "Sex was discussed more in the common room than in class" and the discussions in class failed to account for the level of discussion of sex within peer groups. Another participant, aged 18, stated that sex education included putting a condom on a dildo, but he added "I had been putting a condom on for two years by then. By the time they did it, it was too late." He added, "We all got that bored, we tried to put one on with our mouths".

Given this failure of sex education, participants spoke about the other ways in which they learnt about sex. One third of participants spoke about primarily learning about sex and safe sex through personal experience, with five participants using the phrase "**you learn on the job**", and many more used similar phrases to make this point. Of concern, participants were frequently referring to safe sex here, and many spoke of how their knowledge of safe sex practices developed over several years of having sex. One participant, aged 16, lost her virginity at 14, and said:

*It was with someone I had been with for two year, and he hadn't slept with anyone else either. It was more just experimentation and what I've got from movies. I've then just learned from there.*

Participants also frequently **used the internet** to enhance their knowledge of safe sex. Two thirds of participants discussed searching for information on condom usage, as well as how to prevent STIs. One participant, aged 21, said, "I looked at sex education places and different websites...It was quite informative websites, I just googled it". However, some participants discussed gaining this information from movies and television shows. Ten participants discussed watching porn as a way to enhance sexual technique and three referred to it for how to practice safe sex. Mirroring the critique of sex education more broadly (Albury 2014), one participant, aged 22, highlighted the absence of any emotional discussion of sex in porn, stating "I've learned some exotic positions from porn, but it doesn't teach the emotional side of sex, or the necessary safety concerns". It was accepted across participants that sex education was not close to be sufficient for teaching about the value and mechanics of safe sex.

## Norms of Discussing Safe Sex

Sex education was a marginal component of participants' discussion of safe sex. While this can stand as a critique of sex education as practiced in UK schools, it is also evidence of the widespread discussion of sex in participants' social and sexual lives. Most positively, the majority of participants were able to discuss safe sex practices with their romantic partner. Approximately **two thirds** of those who had been in a long-term relationship reporting **having positive conversations with their partner** about safe sex. As one participant, aged 25 said, "I feel more comfortable talking to a partner about anything that has to do with sex, and safe sex is absolutely part of that".

Two major themes emerged in how participants discussed safe sex practices with hook ups and new sexual partners. One group of participants were **explicit in their discussion of safe sex**. This would occur on mobile phones, over dating and 'hook up' apps or in person. While some participants found this "embarrassing" or "awkward", others felt it to be a "standard" part of hooking up. As one participant stated, "I just expect it. So whether I ask them if they have condoms, or one of us buys them, we just know in advance that it will be safe". The second way participants dealt with safe sex on hook ups was not to discuss the issue. Importantly, however, this was because they presumed condom usage would occur, or would be implied at some point in conversation.

However, there was concern that these unspoken rules might not be shared by others. This was supported by one male participant who tried to avoid using condoms on hook ups. Aged 24, he said:

*If I bring a girl home, I only use a condom if she says, 'do you have a condom?' If she didn't say that, then I would raw dog it... With a partner, after a while of condoms, I'd bring up the topic of birth control. I don't hate condoms, but it ruins the flow of things.*

Finally, a recurring worry related to hook ups, particularly among the male participants, was the concern about having unsafe sex when drunk. One participant, aged 22, said:

*Feeling like not using a condom when you're feeling quite drunk is scary... Sometimes when you're out and you pull a girl and you think 'fuck it', I'm too drunk to stick it on. You're so drunk, you might think 'fuck it', and is she sober enough to ask?*

Across the sample, there was a range of different expectations and beliefs related to discussing safe sex, which is problematic given the social contexts in which hook ups occur, particularly related to drunkenness.

## Online Discussions and the Potential Benefits of a Condom Emoji

This disconnection between different participants' personal discussions of safe sex was mirrored in the variety way they communicated about these issues online (see Widman et al. 2014). About 75% of participants **spoke freely about their sexual activity and desires**,

often in 'group chats' on various social networking apps. A female participant, aged 17, exemplified the type of discussion that occurred, when she said:

*The group chat involves 5 girl-friends and one gay friend. Most of us have boyfriends now, but if any of us slept with someone we would text it to the group... There would be jokes about who we got with, jokes about who we slept with. It would be quite an open conversation about everything.*

Few participants refrained from this conversation, either in person or on mobile phone app devices that enable group chat. Highlighting the fun and playful nature of much of the discussion around sex in friendship groups, **participants used a range of emojis to refer to sex**. These included creating penis shapes (e.g. 3====0), "the spray", the use of aubergine, banana and peach emojis, "the classic finger poking through a hole", "the chicken, for cock, and loads of arrows pointing to holes and stuff" and "lots of wanking ones".

However, there was **less open discussion about their concerns about sex** and healthy sexual practice. Slang terms were frequently used to refer to sex, both for humour and out of embarrassment. Highlighting this, participants often used smileys to imply sex was likely to occur. Here, smileys were used in both text and emoji form (e.g. :) and 😊) and participants reported that using these smileys made messages more flirty. One participant said "If you put a winky face on the end of a sentence, it suddenly provides connotations that weren't there at all". As another participant said:

*If I put 'netflix and chill' with the tonguey smiley, I want sex. It's code, right? We both know sex is on the cards, but we have to pretend we don't. Oh, and if I don't put that smiley, it means I actually want to watch Netflix.*

However, this form of innuendo relied on shared norms between those talking. While many participants said this was true of their friendship groups, it is not necessarily the case for hook ups. A male participant, aged 17, said "Everyone uses them in different ways. Some use them as a joke, others seriously and it's hard to tell which sometimes". As one female participant, aged 23, said: "This guy I hooked up with had apparently been flirting with me for ages before that. He kept on sending me the tonguey smileys but I didn't realise he was flirting."

As part of the interview schedule, participants were asked what they thought of a condom emoji and whether they would use one if it existed. **More than two thirds** (24 out of 30) thought that **a condom emoji would be a good idea**, either for themselves or other people, and there were three key reasons for this.

The first use of a condom emoji would be to put on hook up profiles (Tinder was frequently mentioned, as was grindr) as a way of signalling that they used condoms. This was most common among gay male participants, but some straight participants said it too. One added, "You might not use it on your profile, but it would be an easy way of clarifying in a message. So you're not too forward, but you can still say it in a nice, cartoony way."

The second use was to remind sexual partners to bring condoms. For example, a male student, aged 23, said: "Yeah, great. I'd be like 'I'll bring the 'condom emoji'. You send it

without saying it, and it makes it less awkward.” A gay participant said “Quick and easy. I normally say ‘play safe?’ to clarify, but an emoji would be even simpler”.

Thirdly, condom emojis were praised for their potential to **make discussing safe sex easier and more fun**. One participant, aged 21, liked the idea because, he said, “It adds a bit of humour to a serious situation”. Similarly, another participant, also aged 21, said:

*I think I might find it more of a jokey thing, as emojis are more jokey than serious. But it might make people think about condoms more, as it's there and you have always got a picture of it. So yeah, it's a good idea.*

Other participants thought that in addition to making it more fun, it would make it easier. One participant, aged 24, said “It would be easier for shy people.” Saying he wouldn’t use it himself, he added “Condoms should be part of sex, so good to have one”. Similarly another participant commented, “Yeah, for shy people it might really help.”

Those that rejected condom emojis did so because they did not see the value. Three participants thought they were “cringeworthy” and would not be used. Interestingly, the three other participants who thought the emoji “pointless”, had poor sexual health practices themselves. Two had very little sex education, and the third spoke about regularly hooking up with different men without using condoms. It is possible that these participants would benefit if a condom emoji was regularly used in youth cultures.

## Summary

This research has examined some of the issues in discussing safe sex for young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Discussion of sex is perhaps more frequent and public than ever before, yet young people receive little structured help in dealing with these issues. Drawing on interviews with 30 young people, this research has found that there is a disconnect between the general ease with which young people engage in sexual activity and the difficulty they have in discussing issues around safe sex. Formal sex education has failed most of the participants, and many have gained their sexual knowledge by “learning on the job”: through sex, porn consumption and internet searches. Participants tended to discuss safe sex within their romantic relationships, but this happened more infrequently with potential ‘hook ups’.

These issues with discussing safe sex were also present in how they were discussed online. Participants tended to discuss their sexual activity and desires in ‘group chats’ on various social networking apps, but there was less open discussion about safe sex. Emojis were a popular way to refer to sex, and a source of humour, yet participants highlighted difficulties in discussing safe sex more generally. Asked about the value of a condom emoji, more than three quarters of participants welcomed the idea: to put on their profiles hook up apps; to remind partners about condoms; and, most importantly, to make the discussion of safe sex easier and more fun. In a context where sex education has failed participants, and discussion of safe sex is often through innuendo, a condom emoji might have value in promoting the discussion of safe sex more generally.



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